

# Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1870-1871

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With the 1868 configuration of the Gravity Railroad in place, greater quantities of coal than ever were sent to market by the D&H that year (1,991,870 tons). In 1870, for the first time, shipments of coal to market exceeded two million tons per year.

On December 1, 1870, a reduction in the price of mining coal and wages (a reduction of 30 cents per ton for mining, and for inside and outside labor a reduction to the rate paid for the same in April 1869) was announced by the D&H, and the D&H miners struck. The D&H miners were joined in this strike by the D. L. & W. Co., and the Penna. Coal Co. miners, and a general suspension of mining (disharmony between labor and management) in the Lackawanna Valley began.

Notwithstanding the strike of the miners in the Lackawanna Valley in general, there was no suspension of constructive activity in Carbondale upon "the flats" in the upper part of the D&H yard, along the new Railroads (the Valley Road to Scranton, the Jefferson Branch of the Erie). Tracks were being laid there. Freight and passenger depots were being built, coal pockets and chutes were being constructed, and every necessary preparation made for the coming business.

The owners and operators of the major coal mines, iron furnaces, and transportation lines (Thomas Dickson, President of the Delaware and Hudson Canal Co. and representatives of the Pennsylvania Coal Co., Lehigh Coal and Navigation Co., and the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company) met in New York in mid-September 1871. The meeting was avowedly held for the purpose of preventing periodic strikes, and to oppose the combination of the miners and laborers who suspend work when instructed to do so by their secret council.

Because of the suspension, the Delaware & Hudson Railroad Company claimed that it was losing \$250,000 a month, as it employed 15,000 men and boys in the coal mines. The representatives of the coal companies, resolved, at the conclusion of the meeting, to resist, each and every one of the demands of the men.

In spite of the suspension, the D&H announced that the D&H Canal would open about April 10, 1871, if not to ship coal, then to be used as a trout stream: "The D. & H. Canal will be opened throughout its entire length on or about the 10<sup>th</sup> of April. If there is any coal, it will be shipped; if there is none, proposals may be sent in for using the canal as a trout stream during the season. A law will also be passed to compel the shad to come up the Delaware as far as Lackawaxen, and thence to Honesdale via D. & H. Canal.--*Honesdale Citizen*." (*Carbondale Advance*, March 25, 1871, p. 3)

The *Carbondale Advance*, on April 1, 1871, asked the very important question: "Whose fault is it [the suspension]?" "To-day--April 1<sup>st</sup>--is the time that has been very often, and we may say, generally, named, as the probable time for the resumption of work. The time has come, but resumption has not. Hundreds of millions of dollars of capital, and tens of thousands of men, have been four months unemployed. Whose fault is it?" (*Carbondale Advance*, April 1, 1871, p. 3)

**Workmen's Benefit Association is the Problem:** The present suspension, said the *Carbondale Advance* in its issue of April 8, 1871, is a consequence of the Workmen's Benefit Association's being under the control of miserable and incompetent leaders who have controlled the men to their own injury, and brought them to the verge of ruin. The questions at issue are directly between the men and their employees. They alone can settle them, said the *Carbondale Advance*:

**“THE TERRIBLE SUSPENSION.** Our long-suffering people have endured the evils of suspension for between four and five months with remarkable fortitude. All have been willing and desirous that the men should benefit themselves if they could. The scriptural doctrine that ‘The laborer is worthy of his hire,’ is always true and the greater the compensation received for labor, the better for the community. Although it now appears from statistics and tables presented before the Investigating Committee at Harrisburg that, even at the reduction demanded by the operators, the miners would have received still better pay than any other workingmen in Pennsylvania, more even than skilled mechanics, for harder work and longer days, it was fully acquiesced in. All have been anxious that miners should have good pay, for all other interests were promoted by it. The questions at issue are also directly between the men and their employees. They alone can settle them. They would have been undoubtedly settled satisfactorily long ere this but from the terrible misfortune of the W. B. A. getting under the control of most miserable and incompetent leaders, that have controlled the men to their own injury, and brought them to the verge of ruin [emphasis added]. Some wrong-headed and weak-minded men of great pretensions in Schuylkill Co. got at the head of the W. B. A., and at once imagined themselves almost omnipotent. They thought that because they could control 30,000 miners living in six counties they could control those six counties, and because they could control those six counties, they could control the State, and that no politician, no Governor, no Legislature would dare to say *no* to anything they demanded. They supposed in their vanity and folly that the State lay at their feet, and they could rule or ruin at pleasure. They went to Harrisburg as the conqueror goes, as Napoleon went to dictate terms of peace at Berlin. They have returned disgusted with everything—and got nothing. Our miners here have been far too sensible to believe all these flaunting pretensions of the Grand Council, although great pains have been taken to disseminate such notions, but they have wanted their interests promoted, these men have promised to do it, and they have waited patiently for the result. And what is the result? What has been gained? Nothing whatever. Nothing ever will be by such leaders, and in the way they propose to do it. Nothing ever can be. The laws of business and the laws of nature are directly in their path, and cannot be annihilated, set aside, or changed. They are higher and stronger than Grand Councils, or Governors, or Legislatures, or Companies. The price of labor and the price of coal in spite of all these will be governed by the law of supply and demand. There is no possible combination that can keep the price of mining coal for more than a brief period greatly above the price of other work, requiring equal strength, endurance and skill. . . Resumption should take place upon some terms at once. There is no excuse now for delay, or caviling, or empty boasts. The time for these has gone by, and the time for work has come. Work is now the only remedy for the evils which suspension has produced.” (*Carbondale Advance*, April 8, 1871.

By mid-April, it was reported in the *Carbondale Advance* of April 15, 1871, there were signs apparent to the knowledgeable observer that the present suspension might be drawing to an end. In that paper we read: **“The Miners in Council** / The miners in the Lackawanna Valley have been this week in council in regard to the resumption of work. It is a hopeful sign, although so far as we

learn no arrangement has yet been made. The *Morning Republican* gives the following account of the interviews held between the committee of the miners and the officers of the Company on Thursday: "THE MINERS' OFFER. / We are not surprised nor disappointed at the result of the conference between the several committees of miners and the representatives of their respective companies yesterday. The time for any lasting settlement satisfactory to both parties has passed. After four and a half months of sublime and masterly inactivity an impatient public finds the officials of the companies beginning to realize the situation, while each passing week has strengthened the determination of their employees..." (*Carbondale Advance*, April 15, 1871, p. 3)

In early May 1871, in Scranton, the simmering pot, so to speak, began to boil (extreme disharmony), and a confrontation between those who were in favor of resumption faced off with those who were opposed to resumption. A riot took place. Here is the account of that riot that was reprinted in the *Carbondale Advance* of May 13, 1871 from the *N. Y. Tribune* of May 10: **"RIOTING AT THE COAL MINES"** / Scranton, May 9 / About three o'clock this afternoon, while from 50 to 75 of the laborers who are agitating resumption were holding a meeting near the Central shaft, in the rear of Hyde Park, a crowd of women, boys, and a few men, appeared on the scene, calling the laborers 'blacklegs,' 'traitors,' and other such epithets. Fearing a more hostile demonstration, the laborers retreated to higher ground, took out their revolvers, and fired several shots into the crowd, wounding William Gore seriously in the thigh. About twenty shots were fired. Then a hot chase began. The laborers running toward Hampton mines and Briggs' shaft, followed by a constantly increasing crowd of men, women, and boys. Shots were exchanged, and stones thrown from both sides on a field back of Briggs' shaft, and several men were wounded. Patrick White is in a dangerous condition and Martin O'Donnell is also seriously hurt. The latter was placed in a passing wagon, and while going through the main street, was followed by a large crowd, and afterward barely escaped. While the fighting was going on, a detachment of soldiers appeared on the scene, but the laborers were going through the woods toward Providence, a distance of about two miles, followed by their pursuers. The soldiers did not follow, but returned to Scranton with some of the wounded men. / The sum total of the affray is three men seriously wounded, one of them a miner; three men slightly wounded, and two women hurt. The Mayor of the city and the agents of the Company were on the ground soon after the main fight was over. There is no sign of another immediate outbreak, but if the laborers insist on resuming work more riots may be expected. The actual strength of the new movement that has been agitated among the laborers for the last few days is not sufficient to warrant any desirable results. The city is very much excited over the affair, and the authorities are on the watch for further movements. / News of a more peaceful nature has been received from the Delaware & Hudson Co.'s men [emphasis added]. The delegates waited on Mr. Weston, Superintendent, this afternoon, and made the following proposition: 'That all enter the mines without a stated price, and submit the question of wages to arbitration, the umpire to be chosen before resumption takes place.' Mr. Weston immediately telegraphed to Mr. Dickson, who is in New York, and an answer is expected to-morrow. The delegates are confident that their proposition will be accepted, Mr. Dickson having not only suggested arbitration at their former interview with him, but repudiated a settlement on the basis of the Diamond car, choosing the top vein of Carbondale as his standard, thus indicating probably his intention of acting independently of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Company. / **LATER.**—One of the wounded men is not expected to live through the night. Rumors are rife that a raid will be made before morning on the Welsh of Park Hill. Everybody there is arming in self-

defense, and the military have been sent over to the Hampton mines to-night.”(*Carbondale Advance*, May 13, 1871, p. 3)

*In the Carbondale Advance* of May 13, 1871, it was announced that resumption would take place in Schuylkill, Carbon, Columbia and Northumberland Counties the following week. In addition, the DL&W, the Pennsylvania Coal Company, and the D&H announced, in mid-May 1871, that they had no objection to arbitration, to bring to an end the suspension, provided the men will consent to the following conditions: / 1st, Work to be immediately resumed at prices offered 1<sup>st</sup> December, which shall continue until 1<sup>st</sup> of June. / 2d. In the meantime arbitrators to be appointed, three (3) by the miners and three (3) by the Company, with an umpire to be mutually agreed upon; said arbitrators shall fix and determine the rates of wages to be paid on and after the first day of June until the first day of January next. If the arbitrators cannot agree as to rates of wages (and no other questions shall be considered by them) the difference shall be submitted to the umpire and his decision shall be binding, final and conclusive, upon both parties.

By the final week in May, 1871, work was resumed in the mines of the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company in Carbondale and at other points in the Lackawanna Valley, thus ending the worst suspension to date.

**"Termination of Suspension.** / Work has resumed in the mines of the Del. & Hud. C. Co., at this and other points in the Valley, in the early part of the week, thus closing up the most disastrous suspension we have experienced. Coal cars throng the railroad, and the hum or productive industry prevails [harmony restored] on every hand. Elongated countenances are shortened and brightened, and hope and cheerfulness are everywhere manifested." (*Carbondale Advance*, May 27, 1871, p. 3)

Resumption was not universal: the miners in Gibsonburg (Jermyn), in the Hazleton area, and a few other locations and were not yet back to work. The old wages were not restored, but the miners were granted a considerable advance. The miners of the Pennsylvania Coal company who always had especially pleasant relations with the company were the first to resume work on the new arrangement, and the other miners quickly followed.

The strike, which began on December 1, 1870, ended on May 20, 1871, when the WBA and the operators' Anthracite Board of Trade signed the first written contract drawn up in America between miners and operators. In *Century of Progress* we read: “This strike continued until May 20, 1871, when the men accepted the reasonable terms offered them and work was resumed.”(*COP*, p. 207)

In the D&H annual report for 1870, President Thomas Dickson identified the causes which led to the strike of 1870-1871 and said the following about the strike in general:

“About the first of December last, (in concert with the other Companies in our region), a reduction in the wages of miners was made; this action produced a strike, and a total suspension of our mining operations, which continues at this time (April 28<sup>th</sup>). / The causes which led to this strike, are briefly these. During the war the rapid increase in the demand for coal stimulated production beyond precedent, forced higher rates for mining than was paid by any other branch of industry, and attracted to the mines a larger number of men than could be profitably employed when business

returned to its natural channel. / To maintain the then current high wages, the miners formed an Association, which, in a short time embraced the entire Anthracite region, and in the year 1869, resolved that they would not only determine the rates to be paid for labor, but that they would also control and determine the production of the mines and the value of coal to the consumer. This new and extraordinary claim was conceded by a majority of the producers, but was successfully resisted by the three Northern Companies [D&H, DL&W, Pennsylvania Coal Company]. They were compelled, however, by the action of the other regions, to make larger advances in wages than the business would warrant. / With the view of bringing their business again to a proper level, and of equalizing the rates paid for labor with the other regions, the action of November was determined upon. The rates agreed upon were carefully considered, were fully equal to those of other coal producing regions, and were sufficient to yield larger average wages than can be obtained in any other branch of industry in the country. Nothing has occurred since the strike was inaugurated to change the views or the policy then entertained and determined upon. / The system of suspension inaugurated by the men, for the avowed purpose of curtaining the production, is alike disastrous to the Company, to the miner and to the consumer, as no temporary advance in the price of the product will compensate either the operator or the miner for the great losses entailed during periods of suspension, while the consumer bears the burden of enforced high prices, and the risk of having the supply cut off at any moment. / The only safe remedy for over-production is the natural law of trade, and it is the belief of the management that if the suspensions of the last two years had not taken place, and a uniform and steady movement had been maintained, the consumption of 1871, would have been equal to the productive capacity, at prices fairly compensating operator and miner, and furnishing the consumer with coal at moderate and uniform rates. / The only question involved in the issue is whether the property shall be controlled and the policy of the Company determined by the owners, or whether it shall be committed to the care and direction of an irresponsible organization, and in determining this question the managers are strong in the belief that the stockholders can have but one opinion.” (*COP*, pp. 206-207)

And so the enlightened managerial style of Thomas Dickson and the D&H (and of the managers of the DL&W and the Pennsylvania Coal Company at the time) prevailed. The strike was over (harmony restored). There were no losers and no winners. Everybody won. How different the history of anthracite mining and the Delaware and Hudson Railroad would be if that enlightened managerial style had prevailed for the following fifty years!

(To be Continued)

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